



IOWA

PROFILES IN soil health

Mark Korte

Palmer, Iowa

854 acres

Crops: Corn/Soybeans

Planting: No-till/Strip-till

Cover: Radishes, Cereal Rye,
Winter Wheat

unlock the
SECRETS
IN THE
SOIL

Ready for Radishes? The Next BIG Thing

"I wanted to try those radishes," is the simple explanation Pocahontas County farmer Mark Korte gives for planting more than 500 acres of them last summer. "I read about radishes for quite a while on the Internet. When we had to use preventive planting last year, I didn't want to lose all the anhydrous that had been applied," he says. "I wanted to use that nitrogen, and stop soil erosion. So I talked to the farm manager and owners I farm with, and we just decided to do it."

Korte has rented and custom farmed in Pocahontas County for about 15 years. "Mark came to me with the idea," says Rex Wilcox, a farm manager for Stalcup Ag Service in Storm Lake. "He had researched cover crops, and found cereal rye, wheat, and tillage radish seed from a Cover Crop Solutions seed distributor in Nebraska."



Korte's cereal rye was terminated in April. He also planted winter wheat and tillage radishes.

More than conservation

Wilcox says cover crops are a new thing in his area of the state, but there's growing interest. "People are doing it for soil conservation, primarily, but there are other reasons, too. Radishes are getting some attention because of the soil quality improvements they offer."

In fact, tillage or Daikon radishes are rated as excellent for nitrogen scavenging and subsoiling, and very good for soil building, loosening topsoil, and fighting weeds—and also very good for use as forage or for grazing. While they aren't as highly rated for preventing soil erosion as are annual ryegrass, cereal rye, oats, and other plants that excel at soil protection, the radishes Wilcox and Korte seeded left a very good matting from leaves on the ground over the winter.

The next big thing

"Our clients expect us to do the right thing for their farm," Wilcox explains. "They want it taken care of correctly. The reason Mark's been working with us is because he was already using no-till and strip till. Then cover crops add more to the mix. What we've been reading is that if you can keep something growing in the soil all the time, you'll help your cash crop," Wilcox says. "This could be the next big thing for soil conservation."

Larrette Kolbe, district conservationist for the Natural Resources Conservation Service in Pocahontas County, says Korte and Wilcox are part of the group of forward-thinking farmers in the county. "Incentives have been offered here for four years now to use cover crops," Kolbe says. "We're seeing more green in the spring in this county. We reached a high of about 10,000 acres two years ago, and we're holding our own. We've pushed cover crops pretty hard because they have so many benefits. Even in a spring like this year, when we didn't see much top growth of rye, we know the important work was going on underground where the roots were building soil and holding soil in place."

Kolbe says most farmers are using cereal rye, and a high percentage of them fly the seed on before corn or soybean harvest.



NRCS District Conservationist Larrette Kolbe holds up a decaying tillage radish this spring on land Korte farms. Kolbe leads one of Iowa's busiest cover crop counties in Pocahontas.

Catch the snow, too

Korte says that even though he uses strip till to leave crop residues on the ground after harvest, the soil can blow after soybeans. "Cover crops will stop that erosion from the wind, and I was happy when a neighbor noticed that my cover crop fields were also catching the snow. So we get moisture savings that might not always be counted," he says.

Hopes to see cover crops pay

"We seeded wheat and radishes, and we also seeded cereal rye with radishes," Korte says, "at the recommended rates for those mixtures." His biggest concern with cover crops is whether he'll get a payback. "I mixed the seed myself; the cover crops cost us \$23 an acre for seed plus the application cost. I don't want to give up on cover crops, so I hope to see it pays," he says.

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